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BOOK REVIEW

Women's everyday lives in war and peace in the South Caucasus, edited by Ulrike Ziemer, Springer International Publishing, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 281 pp., € 93,59 (hardcover), ISBN 978-3-030-25516-9

While high-profile geopolitical and security concerns too often set the tone in the study and analysis of the South Caucasus, this book edited by Ulrike Ziemer is an explicit attempt at providing a different entry point for empirical research on/in the region. The volume's stated aim is to restore the balance between the geopolitical and the personal, by bringing to the fore the usually marginalized topic of women's lived experiences and highlighting their contribution to social change in the South Caucasus. This feminist lens, coupled with a longitudinal scope covering past and present regional (dis)orders, constitute the book's most valuable aspects – unfolding throughout 11 chapters (including the introduction) authored by an interdisciplinary mix of scholars and activists from within and beyond the South Caucasus.

Women's lives in the South Caucasus are dictated by a constant tension between tradition and social change – which is the volume's cross-cutting theme. Partly due to the failure of Soviet gender equality policies, partly to the socio-economic hardship that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, the aftermath of the Cold War was marked by a retraditionalization of gender norms in the region. At the same time, emancipation narratives resulting from globalization processes made their way to the South Caucasus, inspiring social transformation and women's activism. The chapters presented in the book's Part I challenge the superficial dichotomy of locally-rooted traditional gender roles versus a Western-centric modernity. They cast light on the complexity of female agency, including the ways in which South Caucasus women negotiate their liminal position in creative and subversive ways – for instance through hospitality practices in post-Rose Revolutionary Georgia (chapter 3, by Costanza Curro) or protest strategies during the Velvet Revolution in 2018 Armenia (chapter 4, by Ulrike Ziemer).

Inevitably, women's embodied experiences cannot be dissociated from the transnational political processes affecting the South Caucasus. However, in the volume, issues such as inter-ethnic conflicts, economic transition or security dilemmas are filtered through the bottom-up prism of female agency. As becomes evident in Part II, the question is not how do conflict, war and displacement affect women's everyday lives, but rather through which practices do women adapt to – and eventually foster social change into – conflict-ridden societies? The experience of female internally displaced persons (IDPs) occupies a prominent place: the chapters authored by Shushanik Ghazaryan and Nargiza Arjevanidze focus respectively on the struggles for belonging and the resilience of displaced Armenian women from Baku and displaced Georgian women from Abkhazia. To highlight these women's agency is all the more important for countering the dominant representation of IDPs as victims or recipients of state policies and donors' aid. Worth mentioning is also Nona Shahnazaryan and Ulrike Ziemer's contribution on the doubly-neglected topic of widowhood politics in a de facto entity – Nagorny Karabakh.

The experience of lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LBT) women only makes it into one chapter, where activist Natia Gvianishvili problematizes the politicization of LGBT issues in Georgia and its consequences for the visibility of LBT women. The lived realities of homosexual and gender non-conforming women in Armenia and Azerbaijan remain invisible in the book, missing an opportunity to provide a more transversal, queer-feminist contribution to the study of the South Caucasus. While the absence of a contribution on Armenia and the slight redundancy of two chapters on Azerbaijani feminist activism in Part III somehow spoil the book's overall balance, the final section marks another important point by challenging the contention that "there are no feminists" in the South Caucasus. Notably, the chapter by Sinead Walsh suggests that scholars interested in local manifestations of feminism (in Azerbaijan) should not look for sensational tactics of organized protest, but rather for sparse, subtler acts of everyday resistance to patriarchy.

To sum up, this edited volume's contribution is three-fold: first, it constitutes an empirically-grounded and up-to-date addition to feminist and gender scholarship in general, and to area-studies scholarship in particular. Second, it performs a much-needed shift from the macro- to the micro-level of analysis, fulfilling the stated objective of redressing the predominant geopolitical focus on the South Caucasus region by elevating female agency. Third, the book's feminist methodology (most chapters rely on extensive ethnographic fieldwork and interpretive methods, like narrative interviews) allows the deconstruction of the very notions of "gender" and "feminism" to capture a rich and nuanced picture of a diverse range of women's lived experiences. This book will be of great interest to students and scholars in anthropology, sociology, history, political sciences and gender studies, as well as East European/Caucasus studies, or simply to those who are interested in the empirical exploration of women's agency in the context of post-socialist transition. Students and scholars of civil societies like myself will also find enriching insights on recent developments of feminist and LBT activism in the South Caucasus.

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